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Weak Authorities: Authorship and Meaning in the 1890s

When, in the preface to *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens refers to the main character as the author's "favourite child" ("like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD," 1965:11), he is not only reinforcing the link between real and fictional world, and adding a supplementary guarantee of truthfulness and authenticity to his novel; he is also speaking of the relationship between the author and his imaginary progeny as if it were a blood link. This is symptomatic for the Dickensian model of authorship - one that is based on intimacy and friendship with the reader (Ferguson 2001: 740-44). This presupposes a common ground of shared values, and a relationship of mutual understanding and trust. As Susan L. Ferguson notes in her analysis of Victorian authorship, "Dickens initiated the characteristically Victorian relationship between the writer and his public, a 'communion' described by Thackeray as 'something continual, confidential, something like personal affection'" (qtd. in Ferguson 2001: 743). Dickens himself states as much when he declares that he wants his relationship with his audience to be governed by "a perfectly unfettered, cordial, friendly sentiment" (qtd. in Ferguson 2001: 742).

This cordial "communion" is not merely a matter of public readings and popularity of the author as a person (which Dickens was particularly successful at), but also a matter of textual protocols. For the Victorian reader, the author always hovered behind the text as a source of meaning and legitimacy. This presence was surely not a real, palpable one - unless it was, like in the case of Dickens, sustained by the voice of the performer of public readings - but the Victorian reader was used to searching for a "speaker" who vouched for the truth value of the fiction. In his discussion of the relationship among authorship, implied author, and narrative voice, Richard Aczel (1998: 475) quotes Didier Coste's definition of the authorial voice as "the product of the reader's quest for the origin of the text." This definition is particularly true in the case of the Victorian reader, whose quest for an author-image behind the text is part and parcel of the interpretative process. The act of reading involved the

underlying assumption of an authorial presence, and meaning was implicitly equated with tracing back authorial intentionality. At the other end, writers were aware of this assumption, and the way in which they encoded their authorial position in the text reflected it. There are several ways in which the authorial figure descends into the text, the most obvious of which being the use of "I" either in first person narratives or in the narrator's comments or digressions. As Hochman (1996: 177) demonstrates, "In the nineteenth century the storytelling 'I' in fiction was emphatically associated with the figure of the novelist, a human being who seemed to become accessible to the reader through the process of reading." Additionally, such implicit equivalences between author and narrator were frequently underscored by the existence of recognizably autobiographical elements (like in the case of Dickens), and by the presence of commentary and evaluation from the narrator, who explicitly or implicitly positions himself in relation to the value system promoted by the text (a value system which he shares with his public). These elements amount to a very powerful authorial presence in the text, one that combines the moral authority of Carlyle's writer-teacher and the intimacy of the Dickensian "friend."

Towards the end of the century, with the arising complications in moral stance, the intensifying of textual experimentation, and the shifting role of the reader, the position of the author became less straightforward. Speaking of shifting views towards authorship in the work of Henry James, Hochman (1996: 177) notes that "[bjetween the 1880s and the tum-of-the-century [...] several changes occurred in widely-held assumptions about the pleasures of fiction-reading and the grounds of connection between writer and reader. Like the contact between doctor and patient, manufacturer and customer, novelist and editor (and many others), the relationship between reader and author was transformed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by a sense of growing distance and impersonality." What was lost was precisely the sense of intimacy and shared ground omnipresent in the work of the likes of Dickens. "The common belief that fiction fosters an imaginatively rich and even personal relationship between writer and reader was progressively eroded in the final decades of the century," Hochman notes, tracing this tendency at a textual level in what she calls "the rhetoric of authorial self-effacement" (1996: 177). Most 1890s writers no longer saw themselves as teachers/preachers, partly because there was no longer a stable shared set of values to be transmitted or reinforced. The changes in the economic aspects of publishing also meant that they were targeting a different type of audience than the huge masses which Dickensian

friendliness had rallied - an audience with which they might or might not be on "friendly" terms.

The present paper will look at several modes of "authorial self-effacement" in the fiction of the 1890s, by focusing on authors some of whom are minor, however symptomatic of the trends which melt into the experimentalism of the 1890s and ultimately into the evolutions that lead to Modernism. The first of these modes is that of Medievalism, illustrated through William Morris's *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, where "authorial self-effacement" follows a model of collective authorship. Secondly, George Du Maurier's *Trilby* offers a model of the author who relinquishes his power politely to the reader; he owes a lot to the Victorian author-reader complicity, but is far less certain of the meanings he wants to convey through it. Thirdly, the more experimental writers of the 1890s (Oscar Wilde, but also the younger Aubrey Beardsley and Max Beerbohm) use self-contradiction intentionally, from a very assertive position which makes meaning disruption even more intense; in the case of Beardsley and Beerbohm, this is seconded by irony and self-irony.

The socialist William Morris advocates the return to an idyllic classless society based on a fantasy of the Middle Ages, which involves a model of the artist-craftsman whose humanism is less individualistic, and voice far less assertive than that of the Mid-Victorian writer. As a consequence, in both Morris's literary and visual work there is a traceable attempt at replicating the medieval model of collective authorship, in which the artist perceives himself at most as a craftsman whose personal identity is unimportant, and who frequently works together with other craftsmen. In *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), he replicates the neutral voice of the folk tale, whose shared authorship gives it a collective, traditional authority - not one based on the genius or truthfulness of one single writer, but one that sounds as if it has been legitimized by the story having been told and retold over centuries. Morris as a Victorian vanishes entirely behind the medieval mask, with hardly any authorial intervention in the text. On the one or two occasions when authorial intrusion does occur in the narrative, Morris suitably employs the first person plural in a way which once again suggests that the author is blending in with a whole community of storytellers: "But now leave we Christopher and these good fellows of the Tofts and turn to Goldilind" (1995: Ch. 11). This seems to involve the reader in the story-sharing community, in which the voice that tells the story is less important than the story itself.

Moreover, one of the instances of authorial presence in the text actually weakens rather than strengthens the position of the author, by emphasizing,

in the same demure first person plural, a limitation in knowledge: "Now as to Squire Simon, whether the devil helped him, or his luck, or were it his own cunning and his horse's stoutness, we wot not" (Ch. 9). The text is pervaded by a lack of authorial assertiveness, although this weakening of the authorial position does not dramatically disrupt the Victorian complicity between author and reader. The authorial presence is discrete and muted, yet the story still unfolds against the backdrop of shared values, with no ambiguity as to what the moral stance towards characters and situations should be. The fairy tale structure serves Morris's socialist ideas in that it allows him to make his statement in a way which appears natural, commonsensical, and universally recognizable. The author is not needed in the text, as he speaks with the voice of communal tradition. He does not need to be an assertive presence, as the text stands on its own, as if ready to be perpetuated by the next generation of storytellers.

In the work of George Du Maurier, on the other hand, the weakening of the authorial position arises from quite different sources. As a *Punch* cartoonist, Du Maurier began as a satirist whose critical stance and support for the mid-Victorian moral values was unmistakable. However, with his late literary work of the 1890s and especially with *Trilby* (1894), Du Maurier's authorial stance becomes more complicated. If his formation as a visual artist occurred earlier, in a mid-Victorian cultural atmosphere, his formation as a writer, in later life, in the company of literary friends such as Henry James, displays adherence to another, more innovative set of aesthetic values.

Trilby weaves together autobiographical notations based on the author's own experience of the artistic milieu and the Gothic plot of the young Paris girl who falls prey to the hypnotic powers of the evil musical genius Svengali. The text overlaps at least three different genres - the Late Victorian Gothic, the Mid-Victorian memoir/ autobiographical fiction, and the Decadent novel relating the bohemian lives of artists. Du Maurier preserves the satirist's detachment even in the portrayal of the protagonists, thus relativizing his attitude towards them, and inducing a critical-sympathetic reaction on behalf of the reader.

Consequently, the moral positioning of the authorial voice becomes less straightforward. While Svengali is clearly on the demonic side, exerting at most the fascination of pure evil, the protagonists (Little Billee and Trilby herself), as well as the host of secondary characters that surround them, are treated with a combination of approval and disapproval, warmth and biting irony, drama and humour, which dissolve Du Maurier's authorial stance. He stands behind the text as a shifting and indecisive figure, whose presence is less that of an

authority summoned to confirm the truth value of the text and more that of a commentator who openly declares his limitations.

Indeed, authorial intrusions are very frequent in the text, unlike in the case of Morris. The colloquial, informal tone of such intrusions has a playful familiarity which would not have suited the *illo tempore* solemnity of the latter. However, like in Morris's novel, the authorial voice states its impotence, its lack of knowledge and its indecision on almost every occasion. In the rendering of Trilby's vocal feats when under the influence of Svengali, the authorial voice plays upon its own incapacity to render the whole beauty of the music, and then, still playfully, claims that the best reports of Trilby's voice are inaccessible to him: "Would that I could transcribe here Berlioz's famous series of twelve articles, entitled 'La Svengali,' " which unfortunately "are now out of print," while Théophile Gautier's article is lost because "I forget in which journal this eloquent tribute appeared" (1994: 253-54). Du Maurier is using here one of the favourite strategies of the fin de siècle Gothic - namely he understates and under-explains at the moments when the reader expects a hyperbole, thus relying on the reader's imagination to maximize horror. But it also simultaneously implies that the author relinquishes his hold on the narrative to a certain extent, placing himself in a less authoritative position than had hitherto been common in fiction.

The authorial voice in *Trilby* is polite and civilized, humouring the reader, often announcing what the text is about to do and why - yet often ironic in its make-believe humility. At first sight, Du Maurier speaks in a very Dickensian voice, professing the friendliness and intimacy that pervaded the work of the mid-Victorian writer. The authorial "I" descends on several occasions into the third person narrative to comment, digress or evaluate. However, while in Dickens the authorial presence retains its amiable yet indisputable authority, Du Maurier adopts a far weaker and more indecisive position. In contrast, Du Maurier's authorial intrusions are almost always associated with instances of powerlessness and moral ambiguity. In the initial description of Trilby, in which we are told that "she had all the virtues but one" (1994: 40), the authorial "I" descends into the text to confess to his limitations: "I have found it impossible so to tell her history as to make it quite fit and proper reading for the ubiquitous young person so dear to us all" (Du Maurier 1994: 40). Trilby's lack of virtue must be mentioned, but there is no "proper" way of putting it. "Most deeply to my regret," the narrator continues, "For I had fondly hoped it might one day be said of me that whatever my other literary shortcomings might be, I at least had never penned a line which a pure-minded young British mother

might not read aloud to her little blue-eyed babe as it lies sucking its little bottle in its little bassinette," yet "Fate has willed it otherwise" (Du Maurier 1994: 41). The author playfully declines his responsibility towards his fictional world, attributing its workings not to himself as puppeteer in chief, but to "Fate." He mimes a sigh of resignation in face of his linguistic and authorial powerlessness, while simultaneously providing the reader with a moral portrait that is highly ambiguous. If in the case of Dickens moral sympathies were as clear-cut as they could be, in Du Maurier "poor Trilby's one shortcoming," which the author wishes he "could duly express in some not too familiar medium-in Latin or Greek, let us say" (1994:41), is presented with both overt condemnation and covert sympathy. The shared system of values is still alluded to (the virtues and vices mentioned are still recognizably Victorian), yet what is labelled as a vice is also excused by other qualities ("she was the warmest, most helpful, and most compassionate of friends," "she had no vanity" and had "a virginal heart," Du Maurier 1994: 42), and even turned into a lovable quality: "she followed love for love's sake only, now and then, as she would have followed art if she had been a man" (Du Maurier 1994: 41). Vice and virtue become overlapped to the point in which the narrator himself refuses to choose "Whether it be an aggravation of her misdeeds or an extenuating circumstance" (Du Maurier 1994: 41), thus relinquishing his position as holder of moral solutions, and allowing a sense of uncertainty to pervade the story. This ambivalence is heightened and complicated by irony and self-irony: Trilby herself is treated with simultaneous sympathy and irony, such as when she is said to have "Sheer gaiety of heart and genial good-fellowship, [and] the difficulty of saying nay to earnest pleading" (Du Maurier 1994: 42), i.e. to be ready to engage in sexual activities because of the fact that she is a friendly girl who is unable to say no.

Similarly, the authorial voice is also self-ironic, as the humble account of his inabilities is always made with a wink of complicity towards the reader: when he descends into the autobiographical account of quite recognizable characters who inhabited Late Victorian studios (and would thus be perceived as an "eye witness account" by the reader - one that should confer extra authority to the authorial voice), the narrator glosses: "It might be worth while my trying to sketch some of the more noteworthy [characters], now that my story is slowing for a while - like a French train when the engine-driver sees a long curved tunnel in front of him, as I do - and no light at the other end!" (Du Maurier 1994: 107) The narrator is still an engine driver, but one whose influence upon the pre-determined track and travel speed is very limited. The literary ride, upon

which his job as an author seems to have embarked him more or less willingly, is hardly controllable, it slows down and speeds up by its own accord, and proves to be slightly frightening, what with the dark tunnels ahead. The metaphor is revealing: the responsibility of taking readers to a destination (one that the engine driver seems quite unaware of) belongs to either "Fate," or the railway company, but certainly not to the author.

In Oscar Wilde's work, the systematic use of contradiction (contradiction of readers' expectations, contradiction as rhetorical mechanism, within the omnipresent paradoxes, and self-contradiction) results in a noticeable weakening of authorial position, perhaps best illustrated by *The Portrait of Mr W.* 77., in which, despite the use of the first person narrative and of the narrative voice which rings distinctly Wildean, the reader is left without any authorial anchor to guarantee the truth value of the ideas unfolded in the text.

In a Victorian novel, the first person narrative would normally have endowed the text with more credibility, as it would have been "emphatically associated with the figure of the novelist, a human being who seemed to become accessible to the reader through the process of reading" (Hochman 1996: 177). The Victorian mind would readily have embarked with what it perceived as "Wilde" upon the voyage of discovering Cyril Graham's theory. This identification would have been reinforced by both the essay-like tone of most of the narrative and by the Wildean ring of statement on forgeries and aestheticism in the beginning: "I insisted that [the] so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem" (Wilde 2001b: 80). Recognisable ideas from Wilde's own aesthetics are present in the passage - such as the perfection of representation which overrides both artistic intentionality and any ethical concerns; the importance of masks; and the separation between ethics and aesthetics. Such ideas are recurrent in Wilde's writing, and repeatedly voiced in works where one presupposes an unquestionable authorial intention endorsing them - such as the essays or the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 2001a: 7), where one expects (at least in theory) to find "Wilde's own" ideas.

However, the very same statement raises questions about the ethical position of the "author," as he supports forgeries, an idea which the Victorian reader is quite likely not to share. Thus, it questions the identification of the reader with

the author as a moral centre of the work, and anticipates the crisis of authorship that will subsequently be dramatized by the story. But at this stage this signal remains a mere foreshadowing, and is soon forgotten in the incursion Erskine offers into Cyril Graham's theories regarding Shakespearean authorship. While the theory unfolds, the narrator retains a tone of commonsensical disbelief towards both Cyril and Erskine, placing himself on the same side of the argument as the reader, and sharing the latter's (and the Victorian) "common knowledge" of the identity of W. H. The reader's identification with the narrator's position is almost complete, with Wilde's authorial figure constantly in the background, which makes the reversal of positions even more alienating. When the narrator exclaims to Erskine, "I believe in Willie Hughes!" (Wilde 2001b: 83), the reader is left disconcerted, and the identification between narrator and author is shattered. In what follows, the role of the "voice of reason" and common sense is switched several times between the two main characters, Erskine and the narrator, to the point in which the reader is left with no one to trust, and the authorial identification with the narrator is completely annihilated.

Moreover, problematic authorship is also the main theme of the story. The search for the meaning of Shakespeare's sonnets becomes a search for biographical details, re-enacting Victorian interpretative habits, which too readily (in Wilde's view) equate artistic truth with real-life truth, and aesthetic meaning with authorial intentionality. The incursion in Shakespearean authorship proves fascinating, but futile. It reads as a symmetrical counterpart to Henry James' *The Figure in the Carpet:* the latter dramatizes the search for an overarching meaning, for the central "design" in a work of art, in much the same way in which Wilde dramatizes the quest for the author's biographical person in relation to the work and to its meaning. Both stories are designed to disprove the possibility of arriving at authorial intentionality, and in both of them the consequences of this fallacy are just as deadly. As Erskine declares, "there is something fatal about the idea" (Wilde 2001b: 83). Once again, like in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Figure in the Carpet,* playing with the boundaries between literature and reality seems to unleash monsters, and provides the ground for an uncanny, and (in *The Picture of Dorian Gray)* even Gothic development of the plot. Interestingly, this uncanny development unfolds on a level which once again increases the distance from any possibility of a literal or biographical interpretation of the story, and makes identification between the narratorial "I," or any of the characters, and the authorial position even less likely.

Thus, in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.,* authorship is systematically attacked from a multiplicity of directions, both by the text itself and from within the

fictional world of the text. Where Shakespearean authorship is concerned, details of the author's biography are sought in order to legitimize a certain interpretation of his works - yet some of these details are unreachable, as the existence of Willie Hughes can neither be proved, nor disproved; others are simply invented - such as the portrait, commissioned to corroborate literary evidence with extra-literary evidence, as if somehow anchoring the theory into the real world were the only way of proving it beyond the shadow of a doubt. Although the appearance of the portrait suddenly seems to confirm the validity of the theory, the proof that the portrait is a forgery does not implicitly disprove it either. Neither is it proved, nor disproved by the two main voices in the story - Erskine and the narrator. Erskine's own suicide at the end, mimicking Cyril Graham's last and extreme attempt to prove the theory, is just as fake as the portrait. The revelation that Erskine has actually died from quite different causes leaves the reader in the total dark about whether he eventually believed in the theory or not. Implicitly, the reader is left in the dark as to who to side with, as both Erskine's and the narrator's belief in the theory is eventually uncertain. The only possible moral of this parable is that there is no possible moral, or at least that conventional ways of reading, based on inferring a stable author behind the text, will not yield one.

As for the portrait itself, its authorship could not be harder to pin down: it is allegedly painted by an unknown Elizabethan artist, who turns out to be an obscure contemporary painter who has forged it for money. His authorship is illicit, and by force of circumstances the work must stand on its own, the link with its source not only completely severed, but misleading. No tracing of authorial intentionality or "message" is possible in this case because the painting is conceived to misdirect any interpretative approach based on extra-textual elements. If the viewer attempts to interpret by contextualization, then he is doomed to failure, as he will see the work through the fake context of the Elizabethan age.

Consequently, the story lists a whole range of counter-arguments to authorial authority over the text: narrators are, and are not identifiable with authors; biographical details are elusive, and easy to forge; authors can be whimsical, and change their mind after, or even during text production; they can be completely unknown, or put on a mask and pretend to be someone else altogether (like in the case of the forged painting). Thus, authorial intentionality remains beyond reach, and the author is completely effaced.

The quest for the origin of the text is proved to be an interpretative fallacy, just as in James's *The Figure in the Carpet.* Yet, at the same time, it exerts an

ongoing fascination, as if Wilde recognized it as a need of the reader, but one that will be systematically refused by the text. Just as the condition of the artist remains, romantically, that of not being understood, the condition of the reader should involve an acceptance of limitations in terms of understanding textual meaning. Aesthetic communication is a fake (or, in less offensive terms, virtual) communication which takes place at the level of the text, but it forbids any true communication between the real, biographical persons of author and reader.

Like Oscar Wilde, both Aubrey Beardsley and Max Beerbohm put on textual masks to the point in which their authorial position becomes indiscernible; like Wilde, they both possess paradoxically strong voices, but voices to which they add their own mark - a dimension of self-irony. And, this time quite unlike Wilde, who programmatically deletes any allusion to his biographical presence in his fiction, and even in his essays, Beardsley and Beerbohm both project themselves into the text, be it literary or visual, and both deconstruct their presence until it bears no identification with any definitive authorial authority. Like the Great Masters, they draw self-portraits, or include self-portraits in larger compositions, but these are stylized or caricatured. Beardsley's prose sometimes includes a narratorial "I," but one that mimics weakness and humility. Beerbohm writes his fiction and essays in a way that often resembles memoirs, blending autobiography and fiction until they become indiscernible and the reader is lost among the various authorial masks.

Thus, in Beardsley's *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser,* the authorial "I" is present, but misleading, and not authoritative. In the complimentary letter that serves as an introduction, Beardsley adopts a pose of humility towards his invented patron, and an apologetic tone for the naughtiness of his own text, which clearly place the authorial voice already in the realm of the fictional. The tone is self-ironic, mimicking an old-fashioned submissiveness towards a figure of authority, as Beardsley speaks of himself as a "humble scrivener" (Beardsley and Glassco 1959: 15), but the addressee himself is an object of irony, which denounces the whole humbleness as subversive. Just as subversive is the playfully underscored weakness of the authorial intrusions in the rest of the story, where the voice echoes Dickensian friendliness and displays an impotence a la Du Maurier, but at points in the text where the naughtiness builds up to a maximum. Thus, on several occasions, the narrator declares his limitations and his incapacity to render fully the details of the erotic encounters described, yet the eroticism is maximised rather than attenuated by this playful understatement. Due to the unrestrained explicitness of the erotic details in the story, the reader can only doubt the narrator's claimed incapacity to say everything out loud.

Therefore, the narrator places himself in a position of diminished reliability, and the gap between this narratorial mask and the biographical person of the writer, already established by the lack of autobiographical associations and by the utterly fictional introduction, is further deepened, despite the fact that there are several authorial alter egos in the story (besides Tannhäuser himself, there is a character named the "Abbé"- a clear play on Beardsley's own initials - yet with no other identifiable authorial function).

In Beerbohm's prose, fictional or non-fictional, irony once again leaves his authorial stance ambiguous - maybe even more ambiguous than in the case of Oscar Wilde, as in a piece *The Pervasion of Rouge*, the reader is unsure whether Beerbohm criticizes Decadence, is affiliated with it, or both. The short story *The Happy Hypocrite* (1897) further illustrates this use of irony as a vehicle of authorial self-effacement, despite the fact that, once again, the author explicitly writes himself into the text. The story is written in the third person, but with a very intrusive first person narrator, commenting and digressing, especially over the first pages, upon his main character, the decadent Lord George Hell. The narrator constantly evaluates and positions himself in relation to the character, in a way which, in someone like Dickens, would have been a mark of ethical complicity between author and reader. However, in Beerbohm the ironic tone undermines this complicity, and induces a degree of detachment.

Thus, very early on the narrator waives his opportunity to fully describe the "naughtiness" of his protagonist: "I will not trouble my little readers with a long recital of his great naughtiness. But it were well they should know that he was greedy, destructive, and disobedient" (Beerbohm 1940: 665). This playfully diminutive treatment of his audience, addressed as "little readers," as if the story were a story for children, places the narrator in a position of authority; he chooses to leave out parts of the story - simultaneously mimicking a friendly protectiveness towards the reader, and flashing at him the superiority of the ironist. But he is also quick to decline explicitly any responsibilities in making judgments about the character, yet at the same time implying what the judgment should be: "My little readers will then, I think, acknowledge that any angry judgment they may have passed upon him must be reconsidered and, it may be, withdrawn. I will leave his lordship in their hands" (Beerbohm 1940: 665). Lord George Hell is presented as being highly "naughty;" then, the reader is told authoritatively that he "must" reconsider any "angry judgment" on him, because he "did, at last, atone for all his faults, in a way that was never revealed to the world during his lifetime" (Beerbohm 1940: 665); and authority is waived immediately, as "his lordship" is left "in [the readers'] hands." This

announces a story of sin and repentance, possibly one with a moral, as would be fit for a young audience; however, it also announces a story in which the whole parable may unfold in the register of parody: from the very beginning, Lord George Hell's evil nature is caricatured and ridiculed. His very name signals this, alongside the menial sins he is condemned for - such as the fact that "he often sat up at Carlton House until long after bed-time, playing at games" and "he generally ate and drank more than was good for him" (Beerbohm 1940: 665).

Despite his initial demonstrations of authority, the narrator also appears slightly unsure of what is going on in his third person narrative: "I think he was proud of being horrid" (Beerbohm 1940: 665). He uses elements of the genre of the memoir - the one which was later on to become his personal mark (such as, for instance, in his 1919 story collection *Seven Men*, where fiction and memoir are welded together until they become indistinguishable). He uses the "I" of the eye witness who cares for the accuracy of his report - as the story comes complete with footnotes and references to invented quotations. However, the eye witness account is undermined by the fact that the narrator has witnessed everything but what is essential for the story: "I am glad I never saw his lordship" (Beerbohm 1940: 666). The very eye witness status of the narrative voice is thus tinged with self-irony, as it displays an infallibility fraught with limitations.

The narrator sometimes resorts to an inclusive "we" to denote the complicity with his readers: "after this, we can hardly be surprised when we read that he "seldom sat down to the fashionable game of Limbo with less than four, and sometimes with *as many as seven aces up his sleeve.* We can only wonder that he was tolerated at all" (Beerbohm 1940: 667). Thus, he hints at the shared ground of moral values that had been the basis of narrative protocols in Victorian fiction, but does so playfully, once again marking this by the menial nature of the Lord's "sin." The narrator's apparent friendliness, Dickensian as it may sound, is a mere textual strategy by which courtesy is used to lure the reader into the game the text wants him to play.

Like Aubrey Beardsley, Beerbohm writes himself into the text, but undermines his persona by irony, and by giving the narrator's voice the attributes of fiction. Despite their very personal styles and their assertiveness, both Beardsley and Beerbohm clearly signal they cannot and should not be taken seriously, and that their position as authors is at most a textual pose.

A similar tendency to weaken authorial position pervades the more experimental works of the 1890s: Henry James pleads for objective fiction from which the author has been fully effaced; Joseph Conrad relativizes the truth value of his core narrative by introducing frames and fallible character-narrators such as

Marlow. The Gothic fiction of the 1890s does the same, making use of "found" manuscripts, collating parts written in different genres by different characters (their letters, diaries, confessions), or resorting to "hearsay" as the author claims to have learned the story from a direct participant or witness. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* is preceded by the introduction written in the first person, in which a nephew of the protagonist claims to have found Prendick's story as a manuscript, and expresses his doubts as to its truthfulness. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* begins as a detached third person narrative with no authorial intrusions, and ends with two first person confessions, one by Dr Lanyon and one by Jekyll himself, unmediated by any narrator. Stoker's *Dracula* collates several characters' diaries, letters, and newspaper cuts, unmediated by any authorial presence, and introduced only by the chapter titles.

This weakening of the authorial position can thus be linked to the weakening in the traditional mechanisms of mimesis and in the Victorian assumptions of a truth that lies behind the text. As Barthes (1967) says when he announces *The Death of the Author*, "to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of 'painting' (as the Classic writers put it)," and simultaneously "Once the Author is gone, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes quite useless." Barthes sees this weakening in the position of the author as inextricably linked to the fact that "true locus of writing is reading," and suggests that "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author."

It is my argument therefore not that the author died in the 1890s - with all their experimentations, the 1890s are not yet postmodern - but that he/she took an important step in that direction, with the questioning of Victorian textual protocols involving a questioning of authorial roles inextricably linked to the question of what, and if the literary text actually means.

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